

Establishing Meaningful Experiences in an Early Childhood Setting

Children's Creative Learning Center, Washington, DC

PHOTOGRAPH BY BONNIE NEUGEBAUER

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Our center, Children's Creative Learning Center @ 2200 Penn, opened in August 2011, as a Reggio-inspired full-time and back-up child care center. There were high expectations surrounding the opening of our center. A new center has the potential to be everything you desire. It was with all of this hope, anticipation, and expectation that we started the center with a new business model, a new philosophy, and new staff. We were unfamiliar with the abundance of resource materials available in the corporate setting because in our previous experiences we served either low-income families or families in a lab school setting. Working under this new organizational structure has allowed us to create a space that is not just a place where families are comfortable leaving their children while they work, but we have also begun to create a space where children, teachers, and parents have the opportunity to experience an early childhood setting in a way that challenges their traditional views about early education.

As administrators in a brand-new child care facility, we have taken this exciting opportunity to implement what we see as essential elements for meaningful early childhood experiences for families. We believe this commitment begins



and ends with our center's community of children, families, and teachers.

Our Philosophy

As child care workers in the new global economy, it is imperative that we present families with a new way of looking at their children's first educational experience. We value:

- the quality of education and make sure that families hold us accountable for the experiences children have at our center.
- an excitement for learning.
- the partnership we share with our families, teachers, and administration.
- the resource materials available from our corporate office that we utilize every day.

- the flexibility in creating an environment where families, teachers, and administrators come together for a single purpose.
- our center that functions as a family.

The relationships that develop between staff and families tap into everyone's unique expertise in a way that enriches children's lives (Keyser, 2006).

Parents

Our center is located in Washington, DC, a few blocks from the White House, and is surrounded by a major university and many businesses. There is an extremely high demand for child care in our area. When our doors first opened, we had three children enrolled; we quickly grew

to full capacity in a matter of two months. Parents initially chose our center because it was new, convenient, and immediately solved their child care needs. While we are, of course, happy to help create a better work/life balance for our families, we also want parents to recognize the importance of high-quality early childhood programs and our roles as partners with them in their children's care and education. We know that when parents partner with us as caregivers, they are more likely to have confidence in the program as a whole, as well as the child's primary caregivers. Children can sense this, and it helps them feel more comfortable while in our care (West Ed, 1995).

Understanding parents' important role in partnering with us, we make our child care space one where parents feel that their needs are listened and responded to, just as we do with the children:

- Administrators are available, not just at the front desk or in our offices, but are often found in the classroom working with the teachers, allowing us to be available to answer not only administrative questions but also engage in meaningful conversations with parents about individual children.
- We make sure we answer questions quickly and fully.
- We listen to all concerns and requests, but make sure we keep clear boundaries about our role and what it is we can realistically do to accommodate parents.
- We stay in constant communication with parents via email and provide them with our daily documentation of the classroom's activities. We believe that connecting our parents visually to the daily happenings in the classroom helps them feel connected to their child's day. When teachers use a carefully planned and implemented documentation process this helps to inform and reassure parents (Helms, Veneke, & Steinheimer, 2007). One of our first time parents made an obser-

vation about our center which really summarizes the culture that we have tried to create:

"What strikes us about the care at CCLC is that the teachers go to great lengths to encourage and foster our daughter's growth, at the same time providing the care and attention that she needs as an infant and now a toddler. . . . CCLC provides ample play time for the children and incorporates teaching lessons, so that children are exposed to concepts (texture, shapes, light, music) at an early age."

Another parent commented:

"Finding a center that is as focused on the developmental growth of the children as they are on promoting interactive communication with the parents is a rare find."

Having parents recognize what we do with their children as meaningful to their child's growth establishes our center as a high-quality program.

Teachers

In our start-up year, we have been fortunate to employ teachers who are highly committed, knowledgeable, and open to learning new ideas from administrators and parents. Most teachers were hired with at least five years of group care experience, which helped immensely, freeing us from having to teach 'the basics.' We reminded staff that parents would respond to them based on how they presented themselves.

A focus in our hiring process is making sure that our staff is just as diverse as the families we serve. Our teachers are varied in culture, age, and educational background and each brings a significant strength in their teaching style.

Using an emergent curriculum posed a challenge for most of our classroom

teachers because they came from programs where the curriculum that was implemented came in a packaged form, ready to be taught. At our center teachers are asked to be conscious of what the children are interested in and to create a curriculum based upon those interests. This poses a challenge for the administration, too:

- How do we know if the teachers are fully engaged in the curriculum planning and teaching process?
- How do we allow teachers the creative process of designing their own curriculum, while maintaining some consistency across classrooms?
- How can emergent curriculum be wedded to early learning standards we refer to in our work with children?

As a new program, we continue to ask ourselves these questions. As we try to create a space that encourages critical thinking among the children, we are always looking for new ways to create meaningful experiences with and for them. Allison Adler, our Program Coordinator, recounts an experience with our toddler teachers who are involved in long-term project planning:

"When a new project comes up, the teachers and I often web the idea together. In the last few months, I have found teachers challenging my thoughts about what you can do with different age groups. For example, one of our toddler classrooms started studying the children's home cultures and bringing those into the classroom. I thought this would be too difficult to make meaningful to these young children and that the project would be better suited for an older class. I was wrong! This project went so well: parents were in every week to share a recipe for something their family loves to eat at home; they sent in music from their culture, and the children became closer than ever. They have been able to share things from their home that are meaningful to their family."

Allison's example shows us that with collaboration, a willingness to be vulnerable and follow the children's lead, and a genuine interest in creating a meaningful experience for the children, an amazing project and community bond can be formed.

Creating a Sense of Community

Establishing a center community is important for parents, teachers, and children. Janis Keyser (2006) says, "When families and teachers feel known and respected for who they are, they can create trusting and authentic partnerships with each other." These relationships have created a family, where children, teachers and parents all feel at home.

One of our struggles in creating and maintaining a center-wide community has been the transition patterns of our families. Because of our location, many families are here in our area short term. As a result, we have focused on how to connect our families to our center in new ways. The teachers, as well as administrators, have focused on making everyone feel welcome here. We all show genuine interest in our families' lives outside of the center. Our families, in turn, show interest in who we are as people.

- The daily documentation emails about what their child's class is doing keep them connected to the center during the day.
- We have offered specialists to talk to parents about child-related topics, such as health and language development.
- We have hosted center-wide celebrations and encouraged parent participation by varying the time of day for our celebrations to fit into our parents' busy schedules.

As we continue to grow, like the children in our program, we give ourselves permission to make mistakes, to have successes, and to learn from both. We join the millions of other early childhood professionals around the world who are taking on the challenge of creating meaningful experiences, not only for children, but also for families and staff in our programs. These experiences will help us to redefine our purpose as early childhood professionals in a new global economy.

References

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